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ABSTRACT

The Oceania Literacy Development Program is conducted by the International Reading Association's International Development in Oceania Committee in conjunction with the Australian and New Zealand Reading Associations. The program was designed around three distinct but interdependent roles for the groups involved. First, direction is provided by key literacy workers in the 11 countries of the South Pacific served by the project (it is believed that by identifying key literacy workers in each country it will be possible to identify common as well as specific needs in a manner that is sensitive to local cultural factors. Second, sponsorship and organizational support is provided through the consortium of professional associations. And third, financial support is provided by aid agencies and those concerned for the development of literacy in Oceania. Within the program three target areas have so far been identified for action: book development; children's literature provision; and teacher development. The fundamental task of phase one of the South Pacific Literacy Project is identifying successful literacy teaching practices that are occurring and exploring what can be learned from those situations to help other teachers. By focusing on existing successful programs, literacy teaching practices can be seen in a naturally occurring context of historical, economic, socio-cultural and political as well as educational forces. The challenge is to understand these shaping influences so as to identify how best to assist other teachers as they take on more effective methods of instruction. (MG)

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"SOME INSIGHTS GAINED THROUGH THE OCEANIA LITERACY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM"

Paper presented as part of the symposium "The Cultural Determinates of Literacy : An International Perspective" chaired by Dr. L. J. Chapman at the Thirteenth World Congress on Reading, Stockholm, 3-6 July 1990.

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SOME INSIGHTS GAINED THROUGH THE OCEANIA LITERACY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Paul G. Kidston

The Oceania Literacy Development Program is conducted by the International Reading Association's International Development in Oceania Committee in conjunction with the Australian and New Zealand Reading Associations. It commenced with the bringing together at the Twelfth World Congress on Reading in 1988 at the Gold Coast, Australia, of a number of key literacy workers from South Pacific countries, officers of professional associations committed to supporting appropriate action on literacy in the Pacific area and some key officials from aid agencies such as UNESCO and Rotary International. The program was designed around three distinct but interdependent roles for the groups involved;viz.,

* **direction** is provided by key literacy workers in the eleven countries of the South Pacific served by the project; Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa. While there are a number of issues held in common by many of these countries, for instance, lack of resources, English being the universal language of formal schooling yet a second or third language to most people, and the Tate Oral English program and materials being universally used in most schools, there are significant economic, social, cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic and historical features which require individual solution in each country. A number of localised literacy projects have been developing in some of the countries and these require support. It is believed that by identifying key literacy workers in each country it will be possible to identify common as well as specific needs in a manner that is sensitive to local cultural factors.

* **sponsorship and organisational support** is provided through the consortium of professional associations.

* **financial support** is provided by aid agencies and those concerned for the development of literacy in Oceania.

Within the Oceania Literacy Development Program three target areas have so far been identified for action.

Book Development

Although there have been a number of publishing projects, there is great need for more extensive publishing of materials in vernacular languages as well as local material in English for use in literacy programs in schools.

Children's Literature Provision

The Book Flood research conducted in Fiji (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981 a & b) demonstrated the value of teachers and children sharing quality literature. A need common to most of the South Pacific countries is to have available in schools some children's literature to be shared. (It is not uncommon for the only available print

material to be limited numbers of books of the Tate Program.) A number of Reading Councils in New Zealand and Australia have undertaken to raise funds to provide quality children's literature books to be distributed through the network of key literacy workers.

Teacher Development

For significant improvement to be brought about in school literacy teaching, two key issues need to be addressed; the provision of appropriate materials to read and the professional development of teachers concerning literacy teaching. The latter is the most serious need common to all countries. Many teachers have themselves been educated in schools using the restricted linguistic approach of the Tate Program or "clones" of this program, which remain the most commonly used sets of materials for literacy teaching in English. The associated methods have also become the orthodox approach to teaching vernacular languages in schools.(It is fairly common for a vernacular language to be the medium of instruction for the first couple of school years and after that for English to be taught and to be the medium of instruction.)

The development of an appropriate inservice professional development course for teachers has been addressed in a specific project known as the **South Pacific Literacy Project**. During 1990, as one of three international undertakings for International Literacy Year, the Australian Government has provided the Australian Reading Association with funds to enable the first phase of this project to get under way. This first phase concerns investigating, through a network of key literacy workers across countries, the particular needs of teachers, to identify principles and practices to inform the teacher development course and to lay the foundations from which such a course could be developed.

Rather than reporting on the details of this project, I wish to take a broad perspective. I am trying to step back from the mass of detail that has been revealed about language and literacy teaching in these eleven countries, to view it with some sense of objectivity, and attempt to draw some conclusions about general, broad issues to explain what I see.

In opening the Thirteenth World Congress on Reading, Ms Birgitta Ulvhammar, quoted that an expenditure of four billion dollars would ensure that all people in the world became literate. While a major issue certainly concerns the improvement of funding for education world wide, I believe the issue is not just economic, or even not primarily economic. Habermas (1972) sums this up neatly in his denunciation of the rational technicist approach which holds that "the application of positivist social science can transform problematic, value-laden culture questions into simple matters of technical efficiency".

Educational development, like most forms of development in many of these countries, relies heavily upon aid. The islands of the South Pacific seem to be littered with the remnants of numerous specific, limited focus aid programs. The aid program "concept" lends itself to the technicist approach : a particular location is identified, then a particular problem there is identified and carefully delineated from the complex of issues which surround it. This isolating of "the" problem from the "value-laden culture questions" in which it is embedded can lead to over-simplified single dimension approaches being adopted. Such approaches make for ease of development, ease of implementation, and

ease of funding over the aid period. Despite the fact that limited single issue solutions can have a significant long term impact on education in developing countries, it would seem that as in developed countries, they have only limited success in facilitating literacy development.

An example is the Tate Oral English Program. The South Pacific Commission funded the development of this teaching program and set of materials based on a linguistic theory which was popular at the time. (It emphasised the importance of phonemic and grammatical elements isolated from the contextual factors that shape discourse). Aid money developed it and funded the provision of this program in most of the countries. It was almost universally adopted. In Western countries, programs based on similar restricted theoretical principles have been popularly adopted in the past, but in our environments rich with competing theories and easy access to alternate materials, such "purist" views become diluted in practice. In the more rarefied atmosphere of education in developing countries where there are not the financial resources to provide supplementary or alternate materials, and there is little competition to the theoretical framework of such a rational technicist approach, the impact from such programs for good and bad can be widespread and long lasting. Any imperfection in construction and use can have wide ranging repercussions. In the South Pacific, many teachers were themselves taught English and English literacy through the Tate materials which they are now using. They have little other material to use but more importantly the only method of language teaching with which they are familiar is the method associated with this resource. This tends to devalue such natural learning experiences as story telling in favour of meaningless repetition of pieces of language. The residual effect can be seen in the approaches used in teaching vernacular languages in schools as well as in how English is taught.

Overcoming the problem lies not in the simplistic application of the latest in educational technology of even theory building from another culture. Rather the problem needs to be dealt with "in situ". For this reason the Oceania Literacy Development Program is relying heavily upon local key literacy workers as its directors, and is searching out effective local solutions which can be encouraged, reinforced and learnt from as a guide to action in similar situations. Outside technology and theory building can guide and certainly are necessary to support and help develop local solutions, but unless these solutions or "new approaches" are firmly grounded on aspects of the local culture they, like any other rational technicist approach, have little hope of long term usefulness.

It is important that as literacy educators with a focus on schooling, we take a broad view of the value-laden culture questions that Habermas (1972) suggests impinge on literacy in the school context. Luke, M^{c}Houl and Mey (1990) provide an analysis of the broader contexts of language planning that has taken place in some countries of the South Pacific. If we wish to predict the impact of particular actions on literacy development these broader issues need to be taken into account. For example:

* Who benefits? Literacy in English becomes a vital economic issue in small countries which need a public service with the literacy skills to be able to negotiate trade aid agreements. The issue then arises, that if high levels of literacy are not required universally, are the benefits of education to be directed in a discriminatory way at some groups within that society? If so which groups are to gain the education and economic benefits?

* The South Pacific, particularly the Melanesian countries, are recognised as the most linguistically diverse areas in the world (Tryon, 1988). In Vanuatu for instance, with a population of 130 000, 105 distinct vernacular languages are spoken and some schools use English while others use French as the medium of instruction. Multilingualism presents language planners with an inter-related matrix of historical, economic, political and socio-cultural forces that unpin language and literacy teaching in schools: whose language is chosen as the medium of instruction? Who makes this choice? Who benefits?

* How useful is literacy? Mangubhai (1985) points out that the literate use of language for critical aesthetic, organisational and recreational purposes is likely to be confined to the school setting for most of the population. Often there is little naturally occurring role for literacy in the vernacular although through the Christian churches adopting particular vernaculars for their work and through the westernisation of the economic and political systems, certain literate activities are now undertaken in some vernacular languages. Mangubhai concludes that the uses of "mother tongue literacy and second language literacy will increasingly occur in different spheres of activities with normally little overlap... without one language necessarily regarded as more superior than the other, but rather more appropriate in one situation than in the other" (1985,3). This presents a challenge for educators since research and practice tells us that language (and literacy) is learned and becomes long-lasting in the learner when it is learned through use in a meaningful personally relevant context.

The fundamental task of phase one of the South Pacific Literacy Project is identifying successful literacy teaching practices that are occurring, and exploring what can be learnt from those situations to help other teachers. Two such programs are the Ready to Read Trial (Moore and Lumelume, 1990) and the Kiribati Language Reading Program (Biribo, 1989). By focussing on existing successful programs, literacy teaching practices can be seen in a naturally occurring context of historical, economic, socio-cultural and political as well as educational forces. Our challenge is to understand these shaping influences so as to identify how best to assist other teachers take on more effective methods of instruction.

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